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Literary Practice according to Michel Henry

A Philosophical Introduction to Reading his Novels

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Michel Henry's works contain two aspects, the one philosophical and the other literary. It is possible to look at his four novels as a personal entertainment, a hobby, even though his skill, in this domain also, was recognised by the Renaudot Academy. He seemed to confirm that his fictional attempts, by comparison with the composition of the treatises, were of minor importance in his eyes. Did he not confide that philosophical writing was for him a "very solitary and difficult task," "As for 'literary expression'—I have not worked in this domain," he admitted, "I have a very immediate relationship to books—I could give myself up spontaneously, without taking care of anything, without setting myself problems..."¹ However, the present investigation will focus on the literary quality of his works of fiction.² This approach is not contrary to his ideas on literary writing for three reasons. First, if Henry amused himself by writing stories, it is obvious that in spite of his statements he worked laboriously on his style, even if the results were uneven. Secondly, his novels are echoes of his treatises, sometimes repeating and radicalising their ideas. Thirdly, it is possible to disregard the content of these two aspects of his work, the conformity of themes in his literary and philosophical writings, and to examine the form which would allow us to base our understanding of his works of fiction on his philosophical system. We have this opportunity because he wrote about art, and in spite of the fact that he did not synthesise these two aspects of his works by writing an "aesthetics of the novel,"³ he intended to do so. We can try to understand the motives behind his literary practice by transposing into the realm of literature what he said about painting, in order to understand his novels as "literary works of art." But we want to forestall a possible disappointment by warning that we will neither quote nor study his novels here. The reason for this choice is that this essay is intentionally philosophical. But to develop a "philosophy of literature" is

not an adequate answer, for it renews the submission of the latter to the former. To have an *a priori* idea of literature and to seek to justify it in the reading of poetic texts inevitably leads to a blindness to their specificity or style. We shall thus take as a starting point the definition that Henry gave in his essay on Kandinsky: "Because the truth of art is a transformation of the individual's life, aesthetic experience contracts an indissoluble link with ethics. It is itself an ethics, a 'practice', a mode of actualizing life."⁴ We shall explain the terms of this sentence in order to collect what is relevant for literary practice.

To begin, we can immediately pose several questions about this phrase. First, does this idea of transformation mean that, in reading some works the reader experiences emotions that change his life forever, or does it mean that art is the processing of the author's life into a novel? The idea of actualisation seems to lead the second interpretation. That said, perhaps we should not oppose these two views. What is the link then between aesthetics and ethics? Shall we return to an edifying conception of art, and is it not a case of "moral regression"? But he says that it is experience that is ethical. Hence, it can mean that works send a message, but also, that the artist at work may have a "spiritual" experience (to use the terminology of the inventor of abstraction), which allows him to find himself a unique ethics of life. Lastly, Henry employs the word "practice" in inverted commas to describe the aesthetic experience. Once more, the assumption that he spoke about the creator, the writer, seems to be confirmed. But if creation is indisputably a practice, like painting, sculpting, or writing, if it is manipulation of material (language in the case of literature), these material acts do not seem to involve an ethical experience. Therefore, we must admit that the transformation described in these lines does not take place within transcendence (between the work and the public, and beyond within the intersubjectivity of writer and reader), but within the immanence of the author's subjectivity. Then how should we understand that this inner experience may be a practice at the same time? We can understand that it gives rise to practice, but only later. Reflecting innocently on this definition leads us to conclude that artistic practice merges with aesthetic experience, bringing transcendence to immanence, so to speak. To understand this new conception of practice (that caused him to use inverted commas), we must begin at the end of the sentence with the idea that aesthetic experience and practice are not only "a transformation of life" (*une transformation de la vie*), but "its actualisation" (*sa réalisation*). In French, this term does not refer to the traditional dichotomy which actuality forms with potentiality, but more simply to an "entry into reality," for example "*la réalisation d'un rêve*" (the fulfillment of a dream), "*la réalisation d'un film*" (film making), and so on. Hence, it seems difficult to imagine that life may actualise itself (*que la vie puisse se réaliser*) in the form of an artistic practice. Would this not be to conclude that art is distinct from life? Is art not to be found within life? Obviously, the meaning of the inverted commas around "practice" is only

understandable if we admit that “life” must be conceived also in a particular sense.

Back to Life Itself!

We all believe that we know what life means because we are alive. But to be alive is not enough to know what life is. We are victims of an illusion. Because a living being needs to be alive to exist, we might agree that life boils down to existence. But they are not the same. Existence alone is not enough to know what life is. Worse still, in the present epoch, our bustling existence blinds us to the knowledge of life. Yet this knowledge is primordial, so much so that it seems as a “lost beginning.” This distinction, to which Henry attaches a lot of importance, gives him a singular place among the history of philosophy. His thought belongs to philosophies of immanence—from the great figures Spinoza and Nietzsche to contemporaries like Deleuze and Laruelle—as opposed to philosophies of transcendence like Heidegger’s. To underline the difference between life and existence, which founds the opposition of these two trends, let us remind that existentialists often write *ek-sistence*. For example, temporality if characterised by sequences that Heidegger calls “ecstasies” (*Ekstasen*)⁵, so practice, a central issue of this essay, is defined by him in terms of spatiality and temporality, that is to say, by its nature of *ekstatikon*, or transcendence. In the context of the French post-war years, when Henry began his career, the Gallicising “Ek-stase” has become a generic term to describe a manner to be at a distance from the self, and after all the transcendence. Thus, now that we have remembered this important dichotomy and its function in the cleavage of philosophy, we can return to our earlier question — what is “life” for Henry? — and shall examine Henry’s remark: “la vie . . . ignore l’Ek-stase.”⁶ What did he mean? What is, more precisely, the relationship between his conception of life and *ek-sistence*?

Henry’s statement does not necessarily mean that “life . . . knows nothing about Ek-stasis,”⁷ but also that it *ignores* it. In other words, because life is prior to “the pre-objective dawning of the world and its ek-static emergence,”⁸ it knows them partly because it is their source. But above all, life has the possibility of knowing itself without resorting to the “mediation” of any “[F]ront”⁹ (*Devant*)¹⁰ or “Outside”¹¹ (*Dehors*).¹² Furthermore, life must resist the transcendence of the world and the scientific objectivism which characterise our time of “barbarism.” The verb “*ignorer*” conveys more a meaning of *rejection* than of ignorance because the essence of life “excludes every exteriority from it, because it excludes every relation to the object, every intentionality, and every ek-stasis from itself.”¹³ However, this exclusion must not be understood as a reaction either, for life is primordial. The history of philosophy, phenomenology included, deludes us into believing that no thought is possible without objectivity and the intentionality that constitutes it. Thus, Henry’s system is not only the

denouncement of the predominance of “the mathematical science of nature”¹⁴ over all other forms of thought, but a criticism of philosophy that neglects this knowledge of life where it takes root. We should never forget that the expression “radical immanence,” which designates a source of the thought opposed to the transcendence of the ek-sistence, indicates that life is at the “root” (*radix*) of any philosophy.

It would take too much time here to explain how Henry rediscovered life, starting from the problem of manifestation. But we must state that, as Husserl did, this revelation came from a rereading of the Cartesian revolution. A “non-intentional phenomenology” implies that we are deprived of the *cogitatum*, namely of an object and its objective qualities, by which we believe that only they can provide us with the abstract basis which enable us to think (*cogitare*). Henry’s approach is a certain return to a stage of knowledge prior to any thought. But how is this possible? This question in the form of a refusal shows our resistance, but Henry gets round this resistance by quoting an expression which he borrows paradoxically from the cogito’s father: “*Sentimus nos videre*.”¹⁵ It means indeed “we feel our seeing,” that is to say that everybody is able to feel himself feeling, or, as Descartes said also, phrasing it with the favourite sense of the philosophers: “*videor videre*.”¹⁶ There are not only “sense data” rising from the immanence—the assumption of inner sensations could also give rise to discussion—but of emotions, the English “feeling” providing us with a more substantial confusion between “sensation” and “sentiment.” Henry names “auto-affection” this essential constituent of life, and Scott Davidson was well-advised to make this choice, which finally maintains the French word. For “self-affection,” as a copy of the Husserlian *Selbstaffektion*, would excessively introduce the idea of reflexivity. But that is precisely what not to do. If it is possible to conceive transcendence within immanence, we must do it with a kind of restraint, by attempting to control the mental and philosophical reflex that would make life a pure *cogitatum*. We shall not consent to the idea that existence was prior to life, transcendence to immanence.

To keep the word “affection” was also a wise decision. Part of its history results from the confusion between three Latine verbs (*afficere*, *affectare*, *affactare*), but we would like to concentrate on one of them, *adficere*. It means “to put someone into a certain mood (rather negative),” but especially it gives two terms which are translations for the Greek: *adfectio* that corresponds to *diathesis*, at first “arrangement,” and *adfectus* to *pathos*, a “modification” resulting from an external influence. The French “affecter” and words of the same family conserve all these levels of meaning: *activity* (“affecter des crédits,” to allocate credits; “affecter quelqu’un à une fonction,” to appoint someone; the *affectio societatis* is even the will of legal personalities to associate them, as formulated in the Napoleonic Code); and *passivity* (“être affecté par un événement,” to be affected by an event; “avoir de

l'affection," to feel affection; "*affecter un sentiment*," to feign). But for philosophers, the idea of subjection is dominant in affection, and frequently linked with that of suffering (the Passion of Christ) and holding his corporeity (*Les passions de l'âme*, by Descartes). This digression allows us to better understand the peculiar reflexivity of auto-affection, that is to say, not only the fact, within immanence, that the "subject" does not turn into its proper "object," but also, if we want to keep these terms, that the "subject" is firstly "dominated" by its "object." Accordingly, Henry defines subjectivity as "pathetic,"¹⁷ which does not refer firstly to an idea of pity (even if the notion could prepare for it), but to the idea that, in accordance with the meaning of *adfectus* and affection, *pathos* (the term is highly frequent in his treatises) is the fundamental mechanism of immanence. But how do we understand this passivity, as sensation and sentiment are fused in this notion?

Henry writes: "There is no seeing that does not experiences its seeing, no hearing that does not experience its hearing, no touching that does not immediately experience itself and does not coincide with itself in the very act by which it touches anything whatsoever."¹⁸ It is at this level that reflexivity occurs and its "*immédiateté*" (which means it took place at the same time and without mediation) accounts for its radicalness. Now, at this stage, we are speaking only about sensations. But, in this end of the translation of *Voir l'invisible*, we have a good example, as we said before, of how, in English, the meaning naturally slips from the idea of sensation to that of emotion, when Henry sums up: "The ultimate power of feeling [*pouvoir de sentir*] . . . is the feeling [*celui, sc. le pouvoir de sentir*] in which this sensation [*sensation*] is immediately experienced."¹⁹ In the French text, there is no idea of emotion, even if everyday sentences like "*J'ai une drôle de sensation*" or "*Je ne me sens pas bien*" keep the same ambiguity as *feeling*. But obviously, this wording is not inadequate, as English imposes it and anticipates Henry's thought. To clarify, it is certain that *sensation*, or accurately the "*auto-sensation*," and not the "*self-sensation*," is peculiar to life. He noted, at the beginning of *La barbarie*: "Everything that has this marvellous property of feeling itself [*se sentir soi-même*] is alive, whereas everything that happens to lack it is dead."²⁰ But, inasmuch as sensations are essentially passive and determinate our conception of emotions, the auto-affection cannot be understood as "active" like other traditional reflexivities of philosophy (self-consciousness, self-knowledge, and so on). That is why life appears eventually as an "alienation," within the meaning of servitude, the auto-affection being likened to a self-dependence. Henry expresses this idea outstandingly in the following passage:

Inasmuch as it affects itself, feels itself, and experiences itself, life is completely passive in relation to its own being. It suffers itself and supports itself as something that it has neither sought nor posited, but as something that

happens and continues to happen as un-willed and nonposited by the self, and yet as that which it is, as what it constantly experiences as a self. Inasmuch as life in its essence turns out to be the suffering and supporting of oneself in a suffering (*pâtir*) stronger than freedom, it is not only pathos, the passion of oneself. It is also characterized as suffering.²¹

But these words should not induce us to see Henry's thought as essentially pessimistic. Certainly he criticises our time severely. But the idea of suffering, associated with the being of life, should not lead us to believe that for him the human condition is suffering. On the contrary, we can already say that, if life has for him a certain tragic side but not an exclusive nature, culture, including literature, appears to him as a way to exceed suffering.

Indeed, Henry speaks about "the weight of life" (*le poids de la vie*).²² Furthermore, we have to admit that in this instance he confuses life and existence, or uses these terms casually, as he employs the expression that seems synonymous: "*le fardeau de l'existence*" (the weight of existence).²³ Nevertheless, these words do not run counter to nor challenge what we said earlier, because Henry placed the last expression in inverted commas to show his reservation, and because a "*fardeau*" is heavier and seems external, applying more to transcendence than to immanence. Be that as it may, the weight designates what we called alienation: "It is the way in which life is completely passive with respect to itself, unable to separate itself from itself, and unable to escape from what is oppressive about its being."²⁴ And he adds: "Life undergoes this experience in a suffering that is stronger than any freedom and in a suffering of this suffering [*la souffrance de ce subir*]."²⁵ Thus life appears as an unavoidable subjection, as "it is impossible for life to undo that with which it has been burdened, that is to say, itself."²⁶ So is there no way out?

First of all, Henry's lexicon brings also a more joyful dimension. He says that "the embrace of itself [*l'étreinte de soi*] is the essence of life."²⁷ So we could have a reading that tends to be superficial and "narcissistic," as if "*l'étreinte de soi*" meant that everyone "embraces" oneself in the intimacy of being, as if "*l'auto-affection*" meant that life consists of loving oneself. This interpretation is acceptable, if we understand that it is suffering that produces enjoyment in the final analysis. Henry specifies that the pathos "is modalized in the terms of the fundamental phenomenological tonalities of suffering [*souffrir*] and joy [*jouir*]."²⁸ Let us point out, that if the verb "*jouir*" means "to enjoy" in an elevated style, it is common in French to designate an orgasm. But it is true that earlier Henry preferred the dichotomy between "*la Souffrance*" (Suffering) and "*la Joie*" (Joy).²⁹ But how does suffering become joy? This duality is fundamental. Suffering, in the meaning of passivity (this verb means also "to bear" in French), is "the way for life to take hold of its being and to enjoy itself."³⁰ So life is a "passage" or a "perpetual oscillation

from suffering to joy.” But this immanent motion is based on suffering and proceeds from the senses. The suffering of the being comes from the fact that it is “thrown into itself” (*jeté en soi*) and “driven back to itself” (*acculé à soi*).³¹ But it has collateral effects. Of course, perception cannot be understood as a pure passivity, but also as an act. Now, “every act . . . has its real being in pathos and precisely in its own pathos.”³² Thus pathos is the “mover” of each act, as it is “exalted” by it and produces its “self-development.” We have now arrived at the core of life, “the fundamental law of the inversion of suffering into joy.” But two things in this thesis are particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, this inversion corresponds to the production of the act from pathos. On the other hand, this law applies particularly to senses, in the form of their “self-growth” (*auto-accroissement*). These reflections give us an interesting perspective on the passage, quoted in the introduction, that we shall analyse. We understood the growth and deployment of the senses from pathos which concern of course the sensitivity and sensibility needed for creation. But, at the same time, we see that each act comes from this pathetic subjectivity. Thus, the artistic practice is already understood as “a transformation of the individual’s life,” the genitive being objective, which means the same thing as “a mode of actualizing life.” *This law of inversion and growth in the life is the law of the production of art and literature.* We have now to study its tonalities and the values conveyed by this conception in Henry’s novels.

The Necessity of Art

This oscillation is not only a change of state, but coming initially from pathos, that is from the suffering as “*souffrir*” and “*subir*,” it is already, whatever may be produced with or by life, what animates life. It is, as Henry specifies, “the movement through which life tirelessly comes into oneself and arrives in the self in the conservation and growth of the self.”³³ But, as usual, no translation is “acceptable,” because it forces to decisions which are necessarily unsatisfying and would require an annotation by translators who would complain in this way about the meanings they had to sacrifice. In French, on the one hand, the two verbs, as well as describing this movement of life, communicate also the idea of a difficulty “to reach into” (*parvenir en*), which perhaps accounts for suffering, and for fate, as life “befalls” (*advient à*). On the other hand, Henry writes that “*la vie parvient en soi et advient à soi*.” But does this not mean that “life reaches *itself* and befalls *itself*?” All the difficulty here is explained by the lack of a neutral pronoun in French and by the necessity to distinguish the impersonal nature of life from the subjectivity that it animates. And yet, English cannot make this distinction in the same way as French can. The most evident translation of “*en soi*” is “*per se*,” as in la “*chose en soi*” (*Ding an sich, thing per se*). So we ought to understand that life reaches into itself (*en soi, en elle-même*), and not into the self (*dans le moi*). Thus, it is a movement interior to life, it is the movement by which life manifests itself to itself; for from where should it

come, if it is not from itself? Fortunately, this shift in meaning does not matter because life is at the core of the self or subjectivity. But it does allow us to better understand the nature of this movement and of its later deployment. Our interpretation appears to be obvious by the end of the sentence with the "*accroissement de soi*" that has been rendered by "growth of the self," as "*auto-accroissement*" has been translated by "self-growth." But we should see, even if it appeared difficult to coin a neologism like "auto-growth," that we turn comprehension towards an interpretation that seems to contradict that which was suggested by "auto-affection." This translator's decision is somewhat removed from the original, but once again it is shrewd and anticipates the question to be examined in the following paragraph.

What is the growth of life? It comes from this oscillation or movement, but more precisely from "need" (*besoin*). Need is at the core of life; it is what implies emptiness. But this emptiness cannot be filled, and furthermore it continues this need and increases it. Henry asserts that "subjectivity is entirely need."³⁴ But how do we link this need to growth? At first sight, we have two opposite movements, that is the growth of life, and subjectivity's need, the genitive being subjective. But he also says: "Work or rather spontaneous activity is nothing other than the outgrowth of need and its fulfilment." How can we consider that within activity, and probably within every practice, the outgrowth of need is its fulfilment? Is it not contradictory? To fulfil a need is to fill its emptiness. That is why the translator was right in rendering here "*accroissement du besoin*" by "outgrowth of the need," and not simply by "growth," as usual. The growth of life stays so to speak within immanence, and goes *out* only as instigation of needs. It is only then, with the entrance into transcendence, that needs are fulfilled and that the growth of life is identified with growth of the self. Only then does Henry allow himself to speak of an "*auto-accroissement de la subjectivité*"³⁵ (self-growth of subjectivity),³⁶ because, at that point, and not before, the growth of life has become a deployment of life. It is at this moment that work appears, as we have said, but also every practice, and especially the work of art. Indeed, Henry considers that artistic practice, as constituting an essential part of culture, is the most spontaneous and primeval of all practices, and appears precisely at this moment when the growth of life becomes the outgrowth of the subject, which is the occasion of a modification of the fulfilment of the need, but also, of an "individualisation of the life," as the works are unique to the person. He captures this with the phrase: "Toute culture porte le besoin dans l'accroissement."³⁷ It does not only mean that "Every culture has the need to grow,"³⁸ but that the culture, and every practice which is linked to it, turns need into outgrowth, and that, in return, the deployment of culture grows its "vital need." So what is culture for Henry and how does it appear as a practice of life?

Henry gives us this definition: "Culture is the set of enterprises and practices in which the overflowing of life is expressed. All of them are motivated by the 'burden' [*la "charge"*], the 'too much' that prepares living subjectivity internally as a force ready to be dispensed and required to act under this burden."³⁹ We have already said that life is burdened with itself, and that this first meaning is linked to the weight of life. But there is also an idea of a "*charge*" in this sentence, confirmed by the word "*force*" and by a reflection upon energy in the following lines. In any case, the principle here is that the growth of life leads to its "*overflowing*," or rather "*overabundance*" (*surabondance*). It is our understanding that when there is an "*overflow*" of life, it "*flows into the transcendence*" as an act ("*to act*"). But of course, culture is not only an outlet, the result of a simple mechanism. Culture is linked to life, as the two share the same being⁴⁰ and "*becoming*" (*devenir*),⁴¹ which is the growth of life. So certainly culture gives to life the license to fulfill (*licence de s'accomplir*),⁴² and, as its fulfilment obviously suits its being and is to grow, it is "*the self-realization of life through its self-growth*."⁴³ But it is not simply an indirect consequence of life into transcendence, and the practice cannot be explained from this understanding. It is not an exit out of the reflexivity of auto-affection, whether it was an aim or a consequence, but it is an integral part of this process, as culture is the "*action [of life] on itself*."⁴⁴ More clearly stated: "*Every culture is a culture of life [culture de la vie], in the dual sense whereby life is both the subject and the object of this culture. It is an action that life exerts on itself and through which it transforms itself insofar as life is both transforming and transformed*."⁴⁵ Thus culture is still caught in the reflexivity of life as its "*auto-transformation*," and the expression "*culture de la vie*" must be understood both as an objective and a subjective genitive: life produces culture by its overflowing, but, in return, culture transforms and improves life. But if this is so, we have two problems to resolve. First, as culture becomes identified with the auto-transformation of life, its reflexivity could be understood as some "*experiments*" about it. But not only would this practice imply a necessarily ek-static⁴⁶ "*decision*" that would go against the first assertion that life ignores ek-stasis, but it would also be impossible as "*no action on feeling is possible*." So this interpretation must be rejected. Secondly, if Henry maintains the idea of an action of life, it is in a very special sense. This action, as he says, will not be an "*objective process*," but "*outside of the world*." Hence we understand what the culture for life is and what its action on it is. Culture permits life to experience itself and its "*own Basis*." But we cannot see how culture, characterised as life by the "*total passivity*" (*passivité foncière*) of any action relating to it, could produce practices such as art and literature.

If this question of the "*passivity of action*" is of concern, it is not only because of its obvious antinomy, but also because it renders incomprehensible the idea of an aesthetic experience of a practice (though an experience that can no longer be conceived as an experiment seems merely

passive, and though “practice” was surrounded with inverted commas). Rather than persisting in understanding the mode of deployment of that transcendence, let us consider differently what culture is, otherwise called “culture of life,” in comparison with this “knowledge of life,” which we talked about at the beginning of this article. The latter was defined initially as the “original knowledge of the self,”⁴⁷ that is, as innate and personal. But Henry asserts later: “I call ‘praxis’ the knowledge of life, as a knowledge in which life is at once the power that knows and what is known by it.”⁴⁸ We find again the reflexivity of life, which conflicts, in this particular case, with the traditional and dialectical opposition between pathos and praxis. Moreover, Henry does not only consider that this confusion is peculiar to the knowledge of life, but he also criticises our age for no longer being capable of conceiving knowledge as action. Our scientific age (whose “spiritual” drift is not a decline, concretely speaking, this drift corresponds to our incapacity to ignore ek-stasis) not only denies pathos, but misunderstands praxis. With Modernity, “action has become objective,”⁴⁹ and this mistake is not only characteristic of our time, but of Westerners who always interpret action “as an externalization and a real objectivation.”⁵⁰ On the contrary, Henry says: “Action . . . is only the actualization of the primitive power of this phenomenological body,” that is to say “life,” and, as life is now identified with subjectivity, “action is only possible in and through subjectivity as a praxis.”⁵¹ This does not simply mean that action ought not to be conceived as objective, but that it is never objective, and that only the life is able to put something into practice: “action involves this essential immediation of life . . . , so much so that life only is able to act.”⁵² For our present purposes, this means first that of course any knowledge is not action, but that *the knowledge of life is necessarily action*: “When the knowledge that regulates action is knowledge of life, life coincides with action and is nothing but its auto-affection.”⁵³ But secondly, as any culture is the culture of life and as the culture of life is obviously based on the knowledge of life, *every culture is necessarily practice*: “Inasmuch as culture is the culture of life and rests on this type of knowing, it is essentially practical.”⁵⁴ Hence, as “every culture is essentially practical,”⁵⁵ let us try to identify these “practices of life” that we call “culture.”

We have said that subjectivity is entirely need. Henry tells us that, among these needs some, are “higher needs, which result from the nature of the need,”⁵⁶ and that they “give rise” to “developed forms,” “higher forms”⁵⁷ or “fundamental forms of all culture.”⁵⁸ What are they? They form a triad, which he treats regularly: art, ethics and religion. Through it the movement that we described previously occurs. In other words, these “traditional modes of culture”⁵⁹ provide the “only possible knowledge . . . as life’s experimentation with itself”⁶⁰ (which means that there is definitively no other knowledge) and realise life by favouring its growth. Thus it ensues from what has been said that these three forms of culture are “also practical knowledge.” Thus, now we know in which meaning the aesthetic experience

is a “practice,” it remains, in our effort to explain the quotation with which we started, to understand why it corresponds to one of the forms that compose the triad, that is ethics, and why ethics contracts an indissoluble link with the arts.

It is not at all surprising that art was one of the three forms of culture, but it is more unexpected and apparently shocking to find ethics on his list. Nevertheless, Henry situates culture and ethics at the same “ontological site,”⁶¹ and insists: “Ethics by itself is co-extensive with culture, if it is the case that every living act, including the theoretical, is a practical act, a mode of ethos. As such it is derived from an axiological appreciation.”⁶² In his conception, ethics is thus not a set of norms, which would apply to acts and would be traditionally separated from practice as theory, but, as it is co-extensive with culture, and as culture is necessarily practice, “it shows itself to be co-extensive with life and its full development.”⁶³ Nor does this mean that ethics is reduced to practice, unless we have in mind its new sense inherited from life. Indeed, if Henry dares to advance this definition: “Ethics is the theory of action,”⁶⁴ it is to reassert immediately that only life can act. So how can ethics be practical and theoretical as well? He specifies: “The task of ethics . . . is . . . to understand why there is a teleology immanent in life, and how it is life which decides its own action.”⁶⁵ The knowledge of life “is constituted by all the modes of individual life,” and these modes “are a *habitus* that obeys a typology, or to put it better, a style.”⁶⁶ Thus the term “ethics” must be understood literally as resulting from the ethos. It is constituted by the customs of life, which show, as works composing our heritage, that we have a knowledge of life, or rather a wisdom of life. Ethics comes as a heritage which offers to grasp the purposes of life, and accompanies it as practice. So aesthetics must be understood as ethics. For Henry, aesthetics does not direct the artistic practice more than, for example, ethics the medical deontology. We can even say that ethics, in its meaning of ethos, is the most important of the three forms of culture, for it is the most linked to the practices of life. It could be conceived as a “teleology immanent in art.” Let us now consider how art is a practice of life under the mode of ethics.

How can we explain the usefulness and very existence of art in Henry’s philosophy? Certainly it belongs to culture, which is a practice. But are the two others, religion and especially ethics, not enough? The last is a teleology stemming from the *habitus* and accompanying the development of the life. What explains that life needs this higher form of culture, which is perhaps not more sensitive than religion, for instance, but works with sensitiveness as a material? For Henry, *the ek-sistence of art discloses the one inadequacy of life*. He expounds on it:

Life, by its essence and the will of its innermost being, is never ex-posed or dis-posed in the ek-static Dimension of phenomenality, that is, in the appearance of the world.

That is why it does not display its own reality in the world, but only is represented in it, in the form of an irreal representation and a 'simple representation.'⁶⁷

This precise explanation repeats the duality of meaning of our first description of life: "*La vie ignore l'ek-stase.*" We clearly see that art meets the "will" of life, but above all its impossibility ("its essence") to enter transcendence. What are then the modalities of its deployment in the shape of the artistic practice? Henry defines the work of art as the "auto-affection of the ek-stasis of Being."⁶⁸ This means that the source of art stays in the immanence, that its "site" remains the "subjectivity itself." What then is its action in the world? How does it "auto-affect" ek-stasis? In Henry's view of our "entering into barbarism,"⁶⁹ art plays a major part, as it resists to "the exclusion of sensibility from the lifeworld,"⁷⁰ to the work of science, which "leaves sensibility aside" (*fait abstraction de la sensibilité*).⁷¹ To do this, it composes an imaginary world whose finality is "to produce more intense and determined sentiments."⁷² So the auto-affection that was at the core of the radical immanence is thus transferred into the transcendence, so much so that the artistic practice, and its result when it is perceived, consist "of the self-growth of the subjectivity."⁷³ In fact, art "gives expression to sensibility and investigates its most meaningful accomplishments,"⁷⁴ art is the most genuine expression of life.

What is the conception of literature that emerges from this reading of Henry's philosophy? By showing the function of the work of art in relation to the central concept of life, we can reconstruct his idea of literature. We have seen that the only beings that experience the feeling of themselves are alive, and that life is not only this auto-affection, but an alienation, or, as Henry better said, on the sole real occasion when he expressed himself about literary creation, life only feels itself in a "pathetic crush on itself" (*un écrasement sur soi pathétique*).⁷⁵ It is this condition that causes all practices, amongst which art is the most refined. Thus life is an affect that produces a force that can turn against itself until its destruction (that is what he calls "barbarism"), but life can also reach its fulfilment, that is to say that this force, not being destructive but creative, affects the ek-stasis with the sentiment and the sensation that constitute itself. Then life causes arts through artists, and novels, as poetry, are also the results of this process. Indeed Henry says: "Literature has no other intention than to carry out the . . . disclosure of the essence of life, and if it does so by means of aesthetic processes, this is because art, to which it belongs, is the privileged vehicle for this essential relation to life."⁷⁶ This statement confirms the validity of our method, which has been to consider the novel as a literary work of art and to precede its literary study by this philosophical introduction. It remains to be seen if his own novels are this expected expression of life or narration of pathos.⁷⁷

¹ Michel Henry, “Narrer le pathos. Entretien conduit par Mireille Calle-Gruber (Heidelberg-Montpellier 1989),” *Revue des sciences humaines* 221 (1991), 51. I acknowledge Mr. William Hanley, McMaster University, for the thorough proofreading of this article.

² Having completed a doctorate in philosophy, I am currently preparing a second thesis on this subject at the Université catholique de Louvain under the supervision of Mrs. Myriam Watthee-Delmotte, member of the Royal Academy of Belgium.

³ Henry, “Narrer le pathos,” 57.

⁴ Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009), 19.

⁵ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 302.

⁶ Michel Henry, *La barbarie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), 112.

⁷ Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2012), 63.

⁸ Henry, *Barbarism*, 98.

⁹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 63.

¹⁰ Henry, *La Barbarie*, 112.

¹¹ Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101.

¹² Michel Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), 138.

¹³ Henry, *Barbarism*, 12.

¹⁴ Henry, *Barbarism*, 39.

¹⁵ See Michel Henry, *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 21; *Material Phenomenology*, 81; *Barbarism*, 15.

¹⁶ I pursued this question, as it relates to Descartes and Henry, in a doctoral thesis in Philosophy under the direction of Professor François Laruelle.

¹⁷ Henry, *Seeing*, 112.

¹⁸ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, 112.

¹⁹ Henry, *Voir*, 193; *Seeing the Invisible*, 112.

²⁰ Henry, *Voir*, 15; *Seeing the Invisible*, 6. The same sentence appears in Michel Henry, “L’éthique et la crise de la culture contemporaine,” in *Phénoménologie de la*

vie: Tome 4, *Sur l'éthique et la religion* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 31.

²¹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 36.

²² Henry, *Voir*, 106; *Seeing the Invisible*, 60.

²³ Henry, *Voir*, 107; *Seeing the Invisible*, 61; *La barbarie*, 172; *Barbarism*, 98.

²⁴ Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, 60-61.

²⁵ Henry, *Voir*, 107; *Seeing the Invisible*, 61.

²⁶ Henry, *Barbarism*, 99.

²⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 37.

²⁸ Henry, *La barbarie*, 171; *Barbarism*, 98.

²⁹ Henry, *La barbarie*, 68; *Barbarism*, 37.

³⁰ Henry, *Seeing*, 83.

³¹ Henry, *La barbarie*, 206; *Barbarism*, 118.

³² Henry, *Barbarism*, 117.

³³ Henry, *Barbarism*, 98.

³⁴ Henry, *Barbarism*, 19.

³⁵ Henry, *La barbarie*, 175.

³⁶ Henry, *Barbarism*, 100.

³⁷ Henry, *La barbarie*, 179.

³⁸ Henry, *Barbarism*, 102.

³⁹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 99.

⁴⁰ Henry, *Barbarism*, 70.

⁴¹ Henry, *La barbarie*, 143.

⁴² Henry, *La barbarie*, 126.

⁴³ Henry, *Barbarism*, 125.

⁴⁴ Henry, *Barbarism*, 70.

⁴⁵ Henry, *Barbarism*, 5.

⁴⁶ Henry, *Barbarism*, 70.

⁴⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 6.

⁴⁸ Henry, *Barbarism*, 18.

⁴⁹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 47.

⁵⁰ Henry, *Barbarism*, 99.

⁵¹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 47.

⁵² Henry, "L'éthique et la crise de la culture," 32.

⁵³ Henry, *Barbarism*, 49.

⁵⁴ Henry, *Barbarism*, 18.

- ⁵⁵ Henry, *Barbarism*, 29.
- ⁵⁶ Henry, *Barbarism*, 19.
- ⁵⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 47.
- ⁵⁸ Henry, *Barbarism*, 126.
- ⁵⁹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 87.
- ⁶⁰ Henry, *Barbarism*, 62.
- ⁶¹ Henry, "L'éthique et la crise de la culture," 31.
- ⁶² Henry, *Barbarism*, 126.
- ⁶³ Henry, *Barbarism*, 96.
- ⁶⁴ Henry, "L'éthique et la crise de la culture," 32.
- ⁶⁵ Henry, "L'éthique et la crise de la culture," 33.
- ⁶⁶ Henry, *Barbarism*, 95-96.
- ⁶⁷ Henry, *Barbarism*, 36.
- ⁶⁸ Henry, *Barbarism*, 42.
- ⁶⁹ Henry, *Barbarism*, 1.
- ⁷⁰ Henry, *Barbarism*, 35.
- ⁷¹ Henry, *La barbarie*, 71.
- ⁷² Henry, *Barbarism*, 42.
- ⁷³ Henry, *Barbarism*, 100.
- ⁷⁴ Henry, *Barbarism*, 58.
- ⁷⁵ Henry, "Narrer le pathos," 59.
- ⁷⁶ Henry, *Barbarism*, 128.
- ⁷⁷ Few quality studies have been devoted to the literary side of Henry's works. We can name various papers by Jad Hatem, and recently a literary and philosophical study by Myriam Watthee-Delmotte and Jean Leclercq: "Michel Henry: pour un langage de la subjectivité," in *Philosophy and Literature and the Crisis of Metaphysics*, ed. Sebastian Hüsch (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 455-466.